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Sport and Education in Osceola County: A Question of Priorities

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Tip O'Neill is generally credited with having said, "All politics are local." There is a certain truth to that not just in politics but on all the stages of human activity. In Central Florida over the past two weeks a number of things have happened to reinforce that notion in sport and other venues. At the confluence of local sport and education the last few weeks have been rich in both the ludicrous and the ironic.

Florida, which prides itself as an innovative state, adopted the concept of "charter schools" a few years ago amidst claims that this would open the public schools to competition from entrepreneurs who would then bring innovation and progress to education. A little over a week ago it was reported that one such charter school was being opened in Kissimmee, the good neighbor to Disney World, which would be specifically designed to serve those pre-teens and teens who have dedicated themselves to ice skating. Budding Flemings, Boitanoes, and Hardings would be able to attend classes in a modular classroom (trailer) run as a charter school by the ice rink owners.

One point of contention centered on the issue of a monthly payment for ice time and skating lessons. This seemed to suggest a form of tuition, something not allowed by state law. In the midst of the debate over this innovative educational experiment came insistent cries that public funds should not be used to train athletes. There was a sense of outrage that a school might be in the business of developing professional athletes as part of its educational mission.

In the war of words that followed no one suggested that in much of Florida and America training athletes seems to be the primary mission of most schools. It is at the very least the one they do best. From the lower grades on up through the universities such things as football, basketball, and even baseball or gymnastics, are the primary activities in our schools. Standards are lowered, corners are cut, scholarships awarded, million dollar budgets are commonplace. Ohio State University proclaims in its media guide that a primary goal of their athletic program is to create a quality entertainment product.

Indeed across Florida and over much of the country Friday night high school football seems to be the major reason for the existence of high schools. In small towns and big cities

football Fridays are the high point of the social activities of the community.

So what's the problem with a few ice-skaters being trained in a one-room schoolhouse trailer in Kissimmee?

A few days after this flap over icy schools came another interesting and instructive episode. Again the story emanated from Kissimmee in Osceola County. A football player from one of the high schools where football teams are weak was seeking to transfer to a school with a powerhouse football program. The Florida High School Activities Association forbids transferring for sports purposes.

The player therefore said he wanted to transfer to Football High because it had a more educationally enlightened form of scheduling (schedule of the school day, not football schedule). According to the local newspaper the principal of the school that was being abandoned objected by saying: "If we allow our athletes to change schools, we'll never build a football program."

A point well taken and one which states quite clearly the primary objective of these schools. This particular high school has been graded the lowest in Osceola county for the quality of its education in a county in which the grades for all its high schools are low.

This principal also accused his football rival of trying to recruit his player. Recruiting of high school players is a violation of state rules, but also a common practice both in Florida and nationally.

David Porter, the columnist who reported this story, suggests that principals might be better advised to concern themselves with the quality of the education being offered in their schools rather than the quality of the football programs. The jilted principal might think about going out and recruiting the excellent students at the rival schools in the county. He could then build a school noted for its academics and the number of students it sends on to college on academic scholarships.

If this were done which principal would be most admired: the one whose high school won football games and failed to educate or the one whose school produced quality education but couldn't win football games?

In Osceola County I think the answer is clear and I suspect that it is in most places around the country.

If on the other hand one school produced world class skaters and one produced great football teams it would be a tougher call, but the edge in most places would still go to the football school.

With this sort of enlightened leadership in our schools one can only wonder why there is any shortage of workers in the fast food industry.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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